

# Free African-Americans in Early South Carolina

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African-Americans who were not enslaved were called “free persons of color.” Who they were not more readily defined them than who they were. Obviously, they were not white and not enslaved, but they were not truly free. Nor were they really citizens. On the other hand, they were not aliens either. They were people in limbo. They lived in a kind of no man’s land between the two main groups in South Carolina, whites and enslaved African-Americans. Economically, the free persons of color were not all poor. Some were wealthy. A few were even “masters” themselves, who held legal title to enslaved African-Americans. Socially, fitting into any part of the society in which they lived was hard for them. Some of them identified with their African-American neighbors. Others thought of themselves as being more like whites. Finally, unlike other “free” Americans, their opportunities were reduced, rather than increased, as time passed. Shortly before the Civil War, the South Carolina legislature seriously considered enslaving them. Yet they, like their enslaved brothers and sisters, endured and survived. This chapter tells their story and their contributions.

## How They Became Free

The Federal Census of 1790 was the first official counting of the American population. It listed the population of South Carolina as just under 250,000. African-Americans accounted for about 109,000. Of this number, 1,801 were listed as “free persons of color.” That is only one in every sixty African-Americans in the state. So we are talking about a very small part of the population. Over half of this small group lived in the Charleston area. But their number was growing. We can tell this from earlier colonial tax records. The number of free persons of color had about doubled in the past twenty years.

These figures tell us two things. First, most African-Americans who were free had once been enslaved. Somehow they had gained freedom on their own, or their owners had set them free. Second, the war to free America from the British had enabled some to gain freedom. We will talk about the impact of the Revolutionary War in a later chapter.

But what about those that were free before the Revolution? In the early 1700s, it was not unusual for a master to free his human property in his will. That is, after his death, as his property was divided among his family, some or all of those he had enslaved would be set free. Sometimes the owner provided for those he had enslaved. In 1797, John Oxendine’s will stated that young Bill was to be apprenticed out to learn a trade and freed at age twenty-five. Hannibal Dearington was set free in his owner’s will. He also inherited part of the plantation. Another African-American, freed in 1783, was able to save enough from his inheritance to buy and free a woman and child.

At that time people did not oppose the mixing of whites and blacks as much as they did later. There were even some interracial marriages. Mulatto children—those with one white and one black parent—were the most likely to be set free. By 1850, nearly half of the free African-Americans in South Carolina were of mixed blood. Many of the leading families in Charleston had a mixed heritage. The Noisettes, a wealthy family, were of mixed French and African ancestry. Francis L. Cardozo, a politician in the post-Civil War period whom you will meet later, had an African and Jewish heritage. Richmond Kinloch, a rich millwright, had ancestors from Scotland as well as from Africa. Two rich real-estate speculators, the Dereef brothers, claimed a Native American woman as an ancestor.



*Mann-Simons cottage. Celia Mann bought her freedom from enslavement in Charleston and walked all the way to Columbia. There she worked as a midwife and bought this house, which still stands at 1403 Richland St. and serves as a museum. Reportedly, when General Sherman's army took Columbia near the end of the Civil War, Ms. Mann allowed her wealthy white neighbors to hide in her basement. Photo by Aimee Smith.*

A few African-Americans came to South Carolina during the Colonial period as indentured servants rather than as enslaved. Indenturing servants was a common practice among whites. It required individuals to work for a certain number of years to pay for the cost of their transportation and living expenses. At the end of a set period of time, they were free. A number of the free Africans settled in the coastal areas of South Carolina. In the post-colonial period, some free African-Americans indentured themselves for a period of time in order to buy the freedom of their families. In Edgefield County records show that Frank, who was free, was indentured for sixteen years. He was probably buying the freedom of his wife and children. Love was certainly not free. It required hard work and long years of endurance. Another man indentured himself for seven years to earn freedom for his wife. Sadly, she died one month after she obtained her freedom.

A very few African-Americans became free because they had done something that deserved a special reward. Saving a master's life or protecting his children from harm might earn such a reward. One had to be lucky to have that opportunity. One also

had to be lucky to survive the risks that it might involve.

A few of those who were enslaved were permitted to earn their freedom. Some masters allowed their enslaved African-Americans to earn money by selling things they had made. Others were allowed to hire themselves out during their free time. Because there was not much free time, this took many years. If enough money could be saved, the enslaved person could even buy his or her own freedom. Then, if the ex-master was willing, the newly freed person could save more money and buy freedom for his wife and children. There was no guarantee. The master could change his mind or raise the price.

Occasionally, the state purchased the freedom of an enslaved person who had performed an act of public service. A man named "Ariel" risked his life to put out a fire that would have destroyed St. Philip's Church in Charleston. He received his freedom and a cash payment from the legislature. Two men who testified in court in the Denmark Vesey Revolt trial were rewarded with their freedom and a cash gift. One became wealthy enough to purchase two houses and four lots.

Some free Africans were immigrants who came to the United States for the same reasons that immigrants have always come. As the result of a revolution in San Dominique, a number of whites and blacks arrived in the United States. After the revolution there, making a living was difficult and many people feared for their safety. So many free Africans arrived that white authorities became alarmed. They feared that so many free persons of color might lead enslaved persons of color to think they should be free as well. In 1794, the state legislature passed a law forbidding the entry of free Africans from the West Indies.

### **Tom Molyneux: Boxing to Freedom**

We often talk about “fighting” for freedom. Here is a case of a man who boxed his way to freedom—and to fame! Many early African-Americans, both free and enslaved, were boxers. For sport and entertainment, masters held matches between boxers from different plantations. Sometimes masters bet a great deal of money on who would win. One enslaved boxer, Tom Molyneux, was freed by his Georgetown owners after he won a match against a bully from a Virginia plantation. Molyneux left South Carolina and headed for New York. There he was a great success. He won all his matches.

Boxing was quite popular in England. So Molyneux decided to try his luck there. He won eight straight fights against British boxers. All the losers tried to hide their names because losing to a non-white meant a loss of prestige. Molyneux’s next fight was against the world heavyweight champion. It was December of 1810. More than 20,000 people watched the match for nearly an hour. Unfortunately, Molyneux fell against the ring post and fractured his skull. As a result, he lost the match. In 1811, the two men had a rematch. Molyneux’s health had suffered from his earlier accident, and he lost this match after only nineteen minutes. He never again experienced great success in the ring, and he died in 1818. There was not another major boxing match between a black and a white man until 1891. However, boxing did become a very popular sport during the 1800s. Many other African-Americans went on to achieve great success in the sport.

### **Restrictions on Freedom**

During the 1700s, free persons of color were left alone to live as best they could. Of course they had to endure racial prejudice. During that period, the government did not make their lives more difficult. The government even gave grants of land in the up country to a few free persons of color. For example, a free African-American named Matthew Chavous received 300 acres in 1752.

By the 1800s, life became more difficult for African-Americans in South Carolina. The state first stepped in to control the freeing of African-Americans in 1800. From then on a court would have to approve all acts of “manumission,” the legal term for granting freedom. There was actually a good reason for this at the time. A number of masters used manumission to rid themselves of old, sick, or even dangerous persons. Once freed, masters had no further legal responsibility. This allowed masters to benefit from the enslaved persons’ labor as long as they were strong and useful.

Although the original intentions of the law may have been good, the state soon took total control. South Carolina made freeing anyone difficult no matter what the reason. In 1820, a new law added restrictions. An owner who wished to free someone either had to send him out of the state or have him live under a “trustee.” A trustee was someone, often a close friend, who owned the enslaved person and held the enslaved person’s property in trust for him. While the person was still technically enslaved, he would live as though free. Of course, there was always the risk that the trustee would violate the trust or die.

Laws restricted travel. Without special permission, African-Americans could not leave the state and then return. Once out, they had to stay out. Nor would the state allow free African-Americans, living outside South Carolina, to enter the state. Of course, this made it hard for them to carry on business or see relatives and friends.

Whites thought there were good reasons for these changes. As you learned in an earlier chapter, rumors of revolts were common. Many free African-Americans could read. Keeping track of what they were reading was hard. Whites were afraid that free

African-Americans were giving their enslaved neighbors ideas about freedom. The more free African-Americans traveled and read, the more ideas they might get and spread. Whites were afraid free African-Americans might even help plan revolts. The fact that Denmark Vesey was a free man seemed to prove this point.

So, free African-Americans became less and less free. They could own property but they could not vote. They were not citizens but they did pay taxes. They could testify in court but not against a white person. If a white person claimed that an African-American belonged to him, the law assumed the white was correct unless the African-American could prove him wrong. If free African-Americans committed certain crimes, they could be sold into enslavement by the state. They were not really free. What freedom they had was always in danger.

The law required all free African-Americans to have white guardians. Guardians were in some ways like masters. But guardians had no legal obligations to look after free African-Americans. The purpose was to assure whites that African-Americans would pay their debts and not cause trouble. Some business people even insisted that all contracts be in the guardians' names.

There was more. In 1792 the state passed a law that required all free African-Americans between ages 16 and 50 to pay a \$2.00 "head tax" each year. This might not sound like much today, but it was a lot of money then. It might be several weeks' wages, if you earned wages at all. Some people traded their labor for food and a roof over their heads. They traded for the things they needed and rarely saw any money. They had a very hard time paying taxes. In addition to this special tax, free African-Americans also had

*Most free African-Americans were farmers and had to work very hard to buy and maintain their freedom. This sketch, however, may have shown life somewhat later and was published in 1878. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of SAC. Slide Collection, slide D-37 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Harpers, Courtesy of S.C. Archives.*







*Farmer using an ox driven cart. Farmers used whatever kind of animals they could to get goods to the market or bring the things they needed from the country store. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, slide E-8 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of the Darlington County Historical Commission.*

to pay all the taxes required of white citizens. Sometimes their earnings barely covered all the taxes.

If free African-Americans could not pay their taxes, they could be sold into servitude for a period of time to earn the money. If the tax collectors chose to cheat, free African-Americans had no recourse. In one case the tax collector and sheriff in Charleston stole tax funds. Some of this money was the taxes paid by some free African-Americans. Thirty-one free African-Americans almost were enslaved as a result. Fortunately, the theft was discovered in time.

Authorities could impose special taxes on a whim. After the Denmark Vesey Revolt in 1822, Charleston created a municipal guard. The purpose of the guard was to protect whites. But whites did not pay for it. Taxes on free African-Americans paid for the guard.

### **Ways of Making a Living**

With restrictions like these, life was not easy for free African-Americans. They had to work very hard just to rise above the living standards of those who were

enslaved. Most African-Americans lacked the skills to do more than physical labor, which paid very little. Even so, the fact that free persons of color survived at all in a state where whites enslaved fifty-nine of every sixty blacks was important. They proved that African-Americans could “make it” in America. If given half a chance, they could even make it in South Carolina.

Many free African-Americans in pre-Civil War South Carolina were farmers. Most of these owned small farms between ten and thirty acres. These small farms did not produce enough to make a decent living. Free African-American farmers often had to do other work as well. They had a lot of competition. They had to compete with enslaved African-Americans who were hired out for labor. They also had to compete with white workers who did not face as many restrictions. Surviving was a real accomplishment.

Some free African-Americans went way beyond mere survival. They found real prosperity, as difficult as that was. Some contributed much more. Let us look at a few of these.



*Many of the midwives who had been using only traditional folk medicine were also trained in western medical practices. This is a 1930s picture of a group of "granny midwives." Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, slide I-61 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of Waring Historical Library, Medical University of S.C., Charleston.*

Because education and training were so limited, there were few professionals. For the few who did achieve professional careers, education was the key. Thomas Bonneau of Charleston operated a school for free African-American children from 1803 to 1829. William McKinley also operated a school in Charleston. Two enslaved Africans taught classes at the Charleston Negro School from 1743 to 1765. Free African-Americans operated at least fifteen schools in Charleston during the period from 1800 to 1860. These African-Americans performed heroic tasks. The state provided no support. Without some government support, most schools for African-Americans did not last very long.

Folk medicine was one field that was open to African-Americans in early South Carolina. Those in medicine did not have the kind of formal training that physicians have today. There were very few formally

educated doctors in South Carolina of either race until the 1900s, especially in the rural areas. But many people knew enough about the treatment of diseases to make their living in this way. Among these were the "root doctors" we talked about in the first chapter. Midwives, whom we will talk about later in this chapter, are another such group. Many of these people would seem much like modern day medics or physician's assistants.

In at least one case, a man earned his freedom through medicine. Cesar was an enslaved African-American who was freed by the state legislature in the mid-1700s. He had discovered a cure for a rattlesnake bite. It must have worked, for in addition to his freedom, he was granted an annual payment by the legislature. The cure was published by newspapers both inside and outside of South Carolina during the late 1700s.

Free African-Americans found opportunities in other areas. Many became skilled artisans, such as carpenters, tailors, hairdressers, bricklayers, and butchers. In Charleston, three quarters of the free African-Americans were artisans. Only fifteen percent of the city's overall work force was composed of free African-Americans. However, twenty-five percent of the city's carpenters, forty percent of the city's tailors, and seventy-five percent of the city's millwrights were free African-Americans. They were known for their good work. Even when large numbers of white immigrants arrived, most white customers continued to buy from African-American artisans. Thomas Day was a cabinetmaker in Charleston in the 1800s. The quality of his work was so high that wealthy clients from both South Carolina and Virginia ordered his custom-made furniture.

An 1823 directory of Charleston, which had the largest population of free African-Americans, listed thirty-five different occupations. Almost half of the skilled free African-Americans were carpenters or tailors. In some cases a skill was handed down in a family from generation to generation. Robert Ingliss, the last of seven generations of barbers in one Charleston family, died in 1957.

Some free African-Americans were successful in business. Others became wealthy through purchases of real estate. Among these were Thomas Bonneau, who owned six houses and a plantation when he died. Richard Holloway owned twenty-two houses. Starting as carpenters, Holloway and his family became known for their quality work. Soon they were buying land and becoming "well-to-do." The Kinlochs, also of Charleston, were another such family. They were millwrights who eventually owned several plantations.

John Primas owned a 100-acre farm in the Beaufort area. He bought it in 1731 for 100 pounds sterling. Today, that would be somewhere in the range of \$36,000. (You can make a rough calculation of this as follows. At about the same time in history, Ben Franklin bought three loaves of bread for two pence. Each loaf would cost about a dollar today. It takes twelve pence to make a shilling and twenty shillings to make a pound sterling.) We do not know how Primas came to have all this money, but clearly he was a wealthy man. Thomas Jeremiah, a fisherman

and boat pilot in Charleston, was said to be worth more than 1,000 pounds. William Ellison of Sumter County patented a cotton gin and owned a thriving plantation. Born into enslavement, Ellison had over 100 of his fellow African-Americans working for him in 1860. He purchased two notable pieces of property. One was the home of former Governor Steven D. Miller. The other was a house that had belonged to Revolutionary War General Thomas Sumter. Both of his daughters married white men. All these were clearly exceptions. Most successful free African-Americans used a trade or skill to earn a living.

Free African-American women had even less opportunity than the men. One occupation open to women was that of midwife. Midwives helped pregnant women through their labor and childbirth. Then they took care of the mother and baby. In a time when there were no African-American doctors and too few white ones, this was a vitally important service. Both white and black women used the services of African-American midwives. This was especially so in rural areas where doctors were scarce. Payment was usually whatever the "customer" could afford and not always money. Often midwives were paid in farm produce or small livestock.

In general, fewer women were skilled artisans. Most of the skilled crafts were considered "men's work." However, a number of the women were cooks, seamstresses, or dressmakers. A few women made and sold handicrafts.

Eliza Lee was a cook whose contributions extend far beyond the state. Americans should remember her whenever they enjoy a pickle. A Charlestonian whose "Mansion House" was located near the hotel of the famous Jehu Jones, she was skilled at pickling and preserving. The story is that her two sons left the state to seek a better life. When they had trouble making a living, they began to pickle foods using her recipes. A man by the name of Heinz heard about them. He bought their recipes and the right to mass produce them. Heinz pickles are now history!

Jehu Jones, another free African-American, began his career as a tailor. Later he bought a boarding house in Charleston. His wife, Abby, was an excellent pastry cook. They soon owned one of the most popular hotels in Charleston. The success of this

business made it possible for Jones to buy many lots on Broad Street. This was the center of business in Charleston.

Jones' Hotel even had an international reputation. According to one customer, the most important people who visited Charleston stayed at Jones' hotel. There they found the comforts of home and the best food in the country. An English traveler recommended that "Every Englishman who visits Charleston, will, if he be wise, direct his baggage to be conveyed to Jones' Hotel." Successful as he was, Jones later gave up his business. He left Charleston for New York. A newspaper in Liberia, Africa, offered him the job of editor. When this did not work out, he found he could not return to South Carolina. The state law we mentioned earlier barred him from doing so. He had to sell all of his Charleston property. The fact that a man as prominent as Jones would choose to leave the state in the first place tells us a great deal about the life of free African-Americans in South Carolina. The state lost a very good businessperson.

While most African-Americans were not wealthy, many of those who were used their wealth to help others. Maria Creighton, for example, left her estate to the Baptist Church in Charleston to help poor African-Americans. George Creighton, who may or may not have been related to Maria, migrated to Liberia in 1821. He paid the way for the enslaved people who were legally under his control to migrate as well. Morris Brown bought and freed a number of enslaved African-Americans.

Some African-Americans helped the state as well. In 1779, Joe Farquarson lent money to South Carolina to help pay the cost of the Revolutionary War.

## Organizations

Because they were so few and so isolated, free African-Americans needed each other. The needs were both financial and social. White society was not open to them. Their enslaved neighbors occupied a separate class. So free persons of color formed groups of their own in which to socialize and help each other. One type of organization was the fraternal society.

Many of these organizations were exclusive, just

like white organizations. The best known of these was the Brown Fellowship Society. The Brown Fellowship Society was founded in 1790 to help African-Americans. Membership was open only to lighter skinned "free brown men" and their descendants. This is why the name was "brown" rather than "black." Of course this kind of exclusiveness was based on prejudice its members learned from white society. This would be unacceptable today. The Brown Fellowship Society's membership was limited to fifty people. They met once a month. The society had its own school and its own burial ground. Both of these were limited to members. If a member died, the society saw that his children received an education. Widows and orphans would be cared for. The Brown Fellowship Society lasted into the 1900s.

Other free African-Americans who were well-off established similar groups. Among these were the Humane Brotherhood and the Unity and Friendship Society. Many of these groups were like the white Masons. They had their own secret rituals and customs. Membership gave prestige to the invited few because they had to pass tests to join. The groups provided members with a sense of respect for each other, respect they did not get from the white community. By pooling their resources, members could also provide a kind of "insurance policy" for each other and their families. For example, the Humane Brotherhood helped to support their members and their families when there was illness or death. It provided money on a weekly basis to the families of imprisoned members.

Some groups were mainly charitable. The Minors Moralist Society, organized in 1803, helped to care for free African-American orphans. The Christian Benevolent Society, organized in 1839, provided for the poor. These groups filled a real need that would otherwise have been ignored.

*(Facing Page) Copy of hand written 6 December 1823 Petition of John L. Wilson on behalf of free African-American merchant Jehu Jones to allow him to travel to see his family in New York and to return Records of the S.C. General Assembly Petitions 1823 #18. Courtesy of S.C. Department of Archives and History.*



DOCUMENT V: PETITION TO SENATE

S.C. Department of Archives & History • Jehu Jones: Free Black Entrepreneur

To the Honorable the President & Members of the  
Senate of South Carolina:

The humble Petition of John L. Wilson, Sheweth:  
That he is Guardian to a Coloured man named Jehu  
Jones; that the said Jehu Jones has always borne  
an irreproachable character; that as a member of  
society (and the father of a family, he is respected  
by all who know him; and that his wife and family  
being now abroad and prevented from returning to  
this State, under the penalty of the late act, the  
said John L. Wilson, for and in behalf of his ward,  
the said Jehu Jones, humbly prays your honorable  
body to permit the said Jehu Jones to visit his  
family in New York, and to return to this State,  
by and with the consent of your honorable body.  
And the said John L. Wilson, as Guardian to the  
said Jehu Jones, affirms your honorable body, that  
his ward is a fit and proper subject for the  
exercise of your clemency, and is a worthy and  
respectable member of Society.

And your Petitioner will ever pray.

John L. Wilson

Columbia Decem. 6th 1823

## **Future Leaders**

The story of the free African-Americans of South Carolina before the Civil War is not a happy one. Free persons of color were few in number. They had to overcome tremendous odds to have any success at all. They were socially insecure as well. Because they lived in a society that valued white skin, many of them were prejudiced against their darker sisters and brothers. The idea of unity among all African people was not strong among them. Yet, they too inherited the African idea of an extended family and helped each

other in many ways. Some of the wealthier free African-Americans even supported the Confederate cause during the Civil War. But after that war when enslavement was abolished, the men and women who had been free became leaders of a new movement for African-American rights. They began to feel a greater sense of unity. Those they helped get an education and find success provided the basis for future fights for freedom for all. After the Civil War, they became the leaders of African-American society in the state.